

Sermon Draft

Text: John 15:9–17

Sermon: What Is Love?

Love and commandments are not necessarily words that people think of in the same thought or speak in the same breath. Love has an almost universally pleasant connotation; commandments are often perceived as being restrictive, authoritarian, high-handed. Yet in today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of love and his commandments as inseparable.

Likewise, in the Epistle, we read that to love God is to carry out his commandments. *“And his commandments are not burdensome”* (1 John 5:3). The key to understanding this relationship between love and commandments is always who and why.

It would be burdensome indeed if we were to love in order to become children of God and disciples of Christ. Today's Readings can easily be misunderstood in just that way. Instead, we have already been born of God. We are already God's beloved children, because Christ first loved us with the greatest love, to lay down his life for us.

Then, because we are already Jesus' friends, chosen disciples, God's children, we willingly keep his commandments to love one another.

This is not burdensome at all. To the contrary, we truly desire to "think those things that are right" and to "accomplish them" (Collect).

Because the Lord "has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel," we "*sing to the LORD a new song*" (Psalm 98).

Because "he has not . . . removed his steadfast love from" us, we "shout for joy to God," we "sing the glory of his name," we invite everyone to hear us "tell what he has done" for our souls (Introit). No burden under the commandments here. We eagerly obey his command to preach the risen Christ to all people because he loves all people, including us, without partiality (Acts 10:42, 34).

So, what do you think of when you hear the word love? Do you think of a couple walking hand-in-hand on the beach? Do you think of Valentine's Day and a warm fuzzy feeling in your stomach?

Today we want to understand that such a concept of love is just a very, very small part of love. Today we want to explore the motivation of Christian love, a love modeled after the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What was love to our Savior Jesus Christ? How would he define love? Jesus would not define love with words, but with actions: ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”*** (John 3:16). ***“Having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end. . . . Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet”*** (John 13:1, 5). ***“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”*** (1 John 4:10). There you have it—that is love. For Jesus, love meant nothing apart from deeds. Jesus didn’t just speak love, he did love. Love for Jesus was sacrifice. Jesus sacrificed his time, energy, personal comfort, and the sacrifice of his very life.

Jesus gave all of this love to us very unlovable, sinful human beings. Jesus didn't choose us to love because we loved him first. No, the disciples weren't too good at that. Oh, they talked a good ball game. The night of our text—early that night, that is—Peter and all the disciples were sure they'd make any sacrifice for Jesus, even die with him. Well, you know how that turned out.

The disciples were good with love that was words, but when it came time for sacrifice, to put their lives on the line, even their words bailed out: ***“I don't know the man. I don't know the man! I don't know the man!”*** No, Jesus didn't choose to love the disciples because they chose to love him. He's quite emphatic: ***“You did not choose me, but I chose you”*** (v 16).

But Jesus did choose us, we who were no more lovable and reliable than Peter. Us, who bail when it's time to tell our friends, right out loud, right there when he's being mocked, “I love Jesus.” We weren't lovable, but Jesus says, “I love you—your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus says, “I love you—here is some fish and bread.” Jesus says, “I love you—get up and walk.” Jesus says, “I love you—I lay down my life for you, my friend.”

What is love to you? How would you define love? We wouldn't define love with words, but with what? Why do we love? First of all, we love because God commands us to love. It's not an option. Twice in today's Gospel, Jesus does not suggest that we love—he commands us to love. Second, people know the disciples of Jesus by how they love. We want to be recognized as Jesus' disciples, so we love. How do we love? We love as Jesus loved. Now that's a pretty tough order. **To love as Jesus loved means that we serve as Jesus served.**

We love by sacrifice. We love not by words but by deeds. We love by laying down our lives for others. Not necessarily literally, but as we give of our time, our comforts, and our treasures, we are laying down our lives in love for others. Like when we collect food for the hungry, keeping our food box outside stocked or when we collect school supplies for Romeo.

We want to practice a love that doesn't desire but gives. We love not to get something but to do something. Maybe we shouldn't say, "I love you." Maybe we should say, "What can I do for you?" Love without sacrifice is nothing.

There was a daughter of a princess who was deathly ill with diphtheria. The mother was forbidden to kiss the child because of the almost certain danger of contracting the disease. In one of the many moments of pain for the child, the mother was so distressed that she took her daughter in her arms and soothed her into quietness. The daughter looked into the eyes of her mother and said, "Mama, kiss me." This was too much for the mother's heart. She took her child, pressed her against her body and kissed her. It was a kiss of death. Love is sacrifice without counting the cost.

Whom do we love? Anyone for whom we sacrifice is someone we love, starting with our spouses, children, and friends. We can love people whom we don't even know. How many people give money for the relief of those caught in natural disasters? That is sacrificial love.

We love the unloving. We love those who do not love us. We love as we do deeds in the name of Jesus Christ. We do because Jesus loved us first.

The sacrificial love of Jesus is hard for us to do. It takes effort, practice, and concentration. It takes open eyes to see the needs of others. How can you better love those at home, at church, at work, in your neighborhood? Love with the love of Jesus. Love because he loved you first. I love you. What can I do for you? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen